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Hemispheric Minstrelsies: Race, Nation, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Performance

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HEMISPHERIC MINSTRELSIES:

RACE, NATION, AND EMPIRE IN

NINETEENTH-CENTURY PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation

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Title: Hemispheric Minstrelsies: Race, Nation, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Performance

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My dissertation overlaps hemispheric studies and performance studies to study ethnic impersonation, such as blackface minstrelsy, redface, and yellowface, during the nineteenth century. I build on hemispheric scholarship's interest in borders, nationalism, and imperialism. Performance studies lends a methodology that analyzes contextual elements such as costumes, scenery, and embodied gestures as well as play scripts. My overarching thesis is that ethnic impersonation was a major vehicle for the intertwined constructions of race, nation, and empire during the transitional nineteenth century, in which the United States evolved from former colony to colonizer. My interdisciplinary project uses different media and genres, including plays, travel narratives, photographs, playbills, letters, dances, songs, prose sketches, and other ephemera. I recovered many of these resources via archival research.

In my introduction, I review existing scholarship on the ubiquity of ethnic impersonation in the nineteenth century, discuss my theoretical approach and methodologies, and provide chapter summaries. In the next chapter, I begin my analysis of ethnic impersonation in the 1830s and explain how US performers impersonated Incas by merging redface and blackface in a bid to create a national drama and unseat European cultural dominance. I move on to the mid-nineteenth century and explore the concurrent rise of blackface minstrelsy and expansionism spurred by the ideology of Manifest Destiny. In this chapter, I consider how minstrel stock characters were repurposed in response to gendered rhetoric about the latest cultural clashes. In

the next chapter, I examine how Creek writer Alexander Posey remediated tropes of minstrelsy from the stage to the page in the 1890s, and, in doing so, reified stereotypical portrayals of African Americans to challenge racist representations of Native Americans. I also connect US internal colonialism in the Indian Territory with external colonialism in the Philippines. Next, I recover the international tours of minstrel performers in order to counter early-twentieth century scholarship that painted minstrelsy as a native cultural form. Finally, my conclusion projects plans for future archival research and reflects on the challenges of interdisciplinarity.